

# WILLIAM HENRY DRUMMOND

## “LEITRIMS FORGOTTEN POET”

*Gerry Kilrane*

WILLIAM HENRY DRUMMOND was born on Holy Thursday April 13, 1854 in the townland of Curraun, in the northern end of the parish of Mohill. At that time William's family used the surname Drumm but changed it to Drummond in 1875.

The world that William grew into was one where the British Empire was entering its zenith with Victorian ingenuity, innovation and industrial might allowing the Empire to spread its power and influence around the globe. Just a fortnight prior to William's birth, Britain and France had declared war on Russia and the Crimean War officially began. Just a few miles away at Lough Rynn, William Sydney Clements had acquired the title the Third Earl of Leitrim and begun his infamous lordship. In the Leitrim that the young Drummond was born into, the great Famine, not long ended, had changed the demographics and landscape of the County forever. In Dublin, Oscar Fingal O'Flaherty Wilde was born, a talent whose popularity and fame endures to the present. How ironic it is then that in the latter decades of the Nineteenth Century, William Henry Drummond's name was as well known and in some countries his writings more popular than that of his compatriot. Today is very different as Drummonds works have fallen into disuse and obscurity. We should not forget however this Leitrim man, born in relatively humble beginnings in Mohill who would go on to become the First national poet of Canada.

### Early Life

William was the oldest of four sons of George Drumm and Elizabeth Morris Soden. George was an officer of the Irish Constabulary (not yet Royal until 1867). Elizabeth's family was native to Mohill and lived on a comfortable holding at Creenagh. In 1856 The Drummond Family moved to North Leitrim and lived at Tawley, Tullaghan. The Archives of the University of Toronto record that the young Drummond

was tutored by a Paddy McNulty whilst at Tawley. J B Lyons records that

*“While in Tawley, William attended an Irish National school where he fell under the spell of a gifted and charismatic teacher by the name of Patrick McNulty. At this time, William began to ‘scribble’ his first verses and was exposed to the tradition of Celtic legends expressed in the popular poetry of the day.”*

The family returned briefly to Mohill in 1863-64 before emigrating permanently to Canada in 1865.

According to Williams wife May, George Drumm was dismissed from the police force because of a quarrel he had with Lord Leitrim. It appears his health also broke at this time. Despairing with conditions in Ireland and worried about the family's future, George and his Elizabeth decided to emigrate with their children to Lower Canada. The family arrived in Montreal in the summer of 1864. Sadly the new beginning very quickly turned into a false dawn because in February 1866 George died suddenly and his family, left without even his small pension, faced financial ruin and hardship.

Elizabeth Drumm opened a shop in the front room of their house in Montreal. The boys all sold newspapers, and, when he was 14, William Henry left school and became an apprentice telegraph operator. He worked for several years for a logging firm spending his summers at *L'abond-à-Plouffe*, an isolated lumber town in Quebec. It was here that Drummond had his first encounters with the speech and customs of the French-Canadian backwoodsmen. Many of these men were miners, prospectors or fur trappers and they were known colloquially as *Habitants and Voyageurs*. These characters, many of whom shunned the bright lights and comforts of city life, would be the primary inspiration for the future writings of William Henry Drummond.

Williams's earnings with his telegraph



work helped to keep the family and provide his three younger brothers with an education.

In 1875, having been convinced by a cousin that *“the name Drumm was but a Corruption of the name Drummond our ancient family name”*, William officially changed his surname and that of his mother and brothers to Drummond.

After six summers working in the remote logging camps Drummond set his sights on pursuing a career in Medicine. In 1876-77 Drummond attended the High School of Montreal. He began studying medicine at McGill University the following year but subsequently failed his second year. Sir William Osler, of McGill University fame remembered Drummond as *“a brilliant and loveable personality, but at the same time one of the least studious in my class.”*

In 1879 he transferred to the medical faculty of Bishop's College, Montreal and he completed his studies there. One source records: *“Bill Drummond was better known as an athlete than as a student, excelling in snowshoeing, hammer throwing, putting the shot, and fast walking and for a time was Canadian Amateur Champion of the last named exercise and one*

of the most popular men in College.”

Drummond spent his internship and early years of practice in numerous locations throughout rural Quebec. In 1888 he returned to Montreal, and set up a General medical practice in the family home. In 1893 he was appointed as Professor of Hygiene at his alma Mater, Bishops College. In 1894 he was made assistant Registrar and Professor of Medical Jurisprudence. In 1895 he became associate editor of the Canada Medical Record.

Drummond was also well known as a breeder and exhibitor of Irish terriers. He was a member of the Montreal Kennel Club and the Irish Terrier Club of Canada.

Drummond's brothers George Edward, John James, and Thomas Joseph, all became successful businessmen and the Drummonds were one of the most influential families in both Montreal and Canadian society. William also invested successfully in various ventures with his brothers ranging from Ironworks to silver mines.

When Drummond was 40, he married May Isobel Harvey, a native of Jamaica in the West Indies. The couple was reputed to have met in September 1892 at the Laurentian Club, a well known social club in Montreal. Drummond later travelled to Jamaica where the couple were engaged before marrying at Savanna la Mar, Jamaica.

After their marriage they made frequent trips between Montreal and Jamaica. Drummond became interested in the *French Creole* and *Patois* language patterns and dialects found in the West Indies.

### Work

In his work Drummond embraced the folklore and way of life of rural Québec, writing narrative verse in the English idiom inspired by the French Canadian farmers and woodsmen.

Drummond's best-known poem, *"The wreck of the 'Julie Plante'"* was written in the late 1870s. The poem's origins were recounted by Mrs Drummond; Drummond had been warned by an old French Canadian man to come in off the Lac des Deux Montagnes in a windstorm. The old man had said *"An' de win' she blow, blow, blow lak a hurricane!"* According to Mrs Drummond these words spoken in dialect *"rang so persistently in his ears that, at the dead of night, unable to stand any longer*

*the haunting refrain, he (Drummond) sprang from his bed and penned" the lines that were "to be the herald of his future fame."* With its clever mixture of English and French words, strong rhythms, and witty lines, the poem was an immediate success when eventually published.

*"De win' can blow lak hurricane  
An' s'pose she blow some more,  
You can't get down on Lac St Pierre  
So long you stay on shore"*

Drummond had composed occasional poems for circulation amongst friends and for informal recitation throughout the 1880's. In the early 1890s his verses began appearing in Periodicals and he made his *début* reciting his own poetry.

Drummond does not appear to have courted literary fame and preferred to compose his verse for private readings and intimate gatherings. By 1895-96 however he was planning a published volume with much encouragement from his family and friends. He was also greatly encouraged by the well known French-Canadian poet Louis Fréchette, whom he had met in 1896. The eagerly awaited publication *"The Habitant and other French-Canadian poems"* was a runaway success and transformed Drummond into one of the most popular authors in the English-speaking world. The Volume contained 23 poems and several illustrations by Frederick Simpson Coburn.

In the Introduction Drummond said that having lived beside French Canadians most of his life, he had *"grown to admire and love them."* Although the English-speaking public might be familiar with the urban French Canadian, it *"had little opportunity of becoming acquainted with the habitant"*.

*"The Habitant"* as well as being a popular work was also a critical success. The volume was favorably reviewed in the literary press of Great Britain and North America. The poems themselves became subjects of detailed critical comment. It is unclear how much money Drummond made from sales, but the attention that he received both enabled and forced him to change his life to cope with these new demands: Three more volumes were published:

*"Phil-o-rum's canoe and Madeleine Vercheres;*

*two poems"* (1898); *"Johnnie Courteau and other poems"* (1901); *"The Voyageur and other poems"* (1905).

All three publications were successful and were reprinted many times. Drummond was besieged with requests for speaking engagements, recitations, tours, and more books.

### Later Life

As his fame grew Drummond undertook various lecture tours in the United States and Canada. In 1902 he spent part of the summer in Britain and Ireland. It is not recorded whether he had the opportunity to revisit his birth place. All of these activities brought even more fame as he brought his work to a wider audience. He also received other honors. He was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature of the United Kingdom in 1898 and a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 1899. In 1902 he was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Toronto and in 1905 another would be conferred on him by Bishop's College.

In August 1904 Moira, Drummond's only daughter, was born. The following September his third son William Harvey, died aged three. One of his most famous poems, *"The last portage,"* which appeared in *"The Voyageur and other poems,"* came to him as a result of a dream that he had on Christmas Eve 1904 while he was still mourning the boy's death. In 1905 he closed his medical practice in Montreal. His mother, Elizabeth died in April 1906 and the weight of personal grief seems to have greatly affected Drummond at this time.

Increasingly Drummond was spending more and more time in the mining town of Cobalt where he and his brothers had acquired an interest in silver mines. He spent most of the winter of 1906-7 in Cobalt fighting a small-pox epidemic in the settlement. Drummond's own health suffered in this period. He returned to Montreal in early March, and was the guest speaker at the annual dinner of the St Patrick's Society in Montreal on 18 March 1907. He returned to Cobalt shortly after and died suddenly on the 6th April 1907 from a cerebral hemorrhage. William Henry Drummond, Canada's first national poet was buried in Mount Royal Cemetery, Montreal. He was widely mourned.

A year after his passing, *"The Great Fight: poems and sketches"*, a collection of 20 poems and two sketches, with a short biography by his widow and illustrations by Coburn, was published. *"The poetical works of William Henry Drummond"* was also published posthumously in 1912.

**Summary**

For decades Drummond and his poetry remained important elements within the canon of English Canadian literature. Gradually though his poetry became to be seen as old-fashioned and unrepresentative. Commentators such as Lee Briscoe Thompson lamented that Drummond was a: *"victim of an attack of modernists on late-19th-century poetry"*. Other critics believe that Drummond's poetry was sidelined because it lacked political correctness and might offend the Quebecois people. Thompson believes the *"shelving"* of this

*"people's poet"* was unfortunate, for Drummond represents a very sincere attempt to articulate a sympathetic portrayal of rural French Canadians. Thompson also believed Drummond's work was a valid portrayal of a uniquely Canadian language and dialect which was borne of the fusion of two distinct cultures. In his most recent biography, J B Lyons seeks to redress the fate of Drummond by placing him in the context of dialect poets, the best known being Robert Burns, of course. It remains to be seen what the future holds for the poetry of William Henry Drummond. What cannot be denied is that for a few short decades this son of Leitrim was one of the most popular, and celebrated authors of the day and was considered Canada's national poet.

**New Technology Enterprise Centre for Carrick on Shannon**

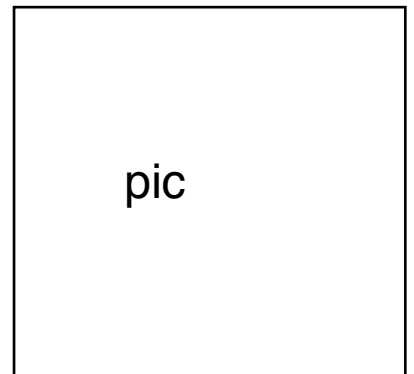
A new 1.4 million Technology Enterprise Centre in Carrick on Shannon is set to provide an exciting business environment for a new dynamic community of entrepreneurs. The new centre is part of The Innovation Enterprise Programme (IEP), a cross-border initiative between Leitrim and Omagh with the aim of supporting the creation and development of innovative technology-oriented businesses in the region.

The Innovation Enterprise Programme (IEP) received 2,272,418, part-financed by the European Union's INTERREG IVA Programme, managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB). The Programme is led by the Irish Central Bor-

der Area Network (ICBAN) in partnership with Omagh District Council, Leitrim County Enterprise Fund, Leitrim County Enterprise Board, Leitrim County Council and Omagh Enterprise Company.

Work on the new Technology Enterprise Centre, which will be built at the Leitrim County Enterprise Fund site on the Dublin Road, Carrick on Shannon, is due to be completed in the summer of 2013. The 7,500 sq. ft. state-of-the-art building will provide a purpose built, technology focused business environment suitable for attracting high value companies and supporting the start-up and growth of indigenous businesses in the region.

Importantly, high speed broadband at affordable prices and flexible lease terms will help contain costs at a critical point in a business's gestation. The hot desk facility, which is new to the region, enables people to drop-in and work in a



vibrant environment with like minded individuals. The new Technology Enterprise Centre will be a 'one stop shop' offering more than just office space to growing entrepreneurs. Business advisory services, including specialist consultancy, mentoring, seminars and cross-border network events all help support and facilitate those looking to develop a business idea.

*For further information on the Technology Enterprise Centre, please contact: Hilary McPartland, Innovation Officer, Leitrim County Enterprise Board*